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ABSTRACT

California annually experiences significant turnover among its superintendents; 468 out of 1,002 superintendents vacated K-12 superintendent seats in California between 1986 and 1989. Of this number, 92 accepted superintendencies in other districts and 4 became county superintendents. To discover where the other 372 superintendents went, information on every California district and superintendent was drawn from several consecutive issues of the "California Public School Directory" and entered into a computerized database. Questionnaires were also sent to new superintendents and to women superintendents listed in the 1989 directory. The literature consistently reports that superintendents leave positions to: (1) become superintendent of a larger, higher status district; (2) become superintendent of a district paying significantly more; (3) escape from a disharmonious board/superintendent relationship; and (4) enter into retirement. The database developed for this study, however, does not show that superintendents typically retire or move to larger, higher status districts with higher pay. Fully 80 percent of vacating superintendents do not move to other California superintendencies within 2 years. Results show that 13.7 percent of vacating superintendents assumed or accepted other administrative positions of lesser responsibility rather than retire. Also, 18.3 percent voluntarily retired, and 6.62 percent accepted unplanned, involuntary retirement, leaving 38.68 percent unaccounted for. Based on database and survey results, this paper unequivocally finds that board/superintendent disharmony is the major cause of superintendent turnover in California. (MLH)

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Where Do All The Superintendents Go?

—Douglas E. Giles, Superintendent
Santee School District

—Sharon Giles, Board Member
Chula Vista City School District

California annually experiences significant turnover among its superintendents. Four hundred sixty-eight out of one thousand and two superintendents vacated K-12 superintendent seats in California between 1986 and 1989. Niney-two of those persons accepted superintendencies in other districts. One accepted appointment, three won election as county superintendents.

Where did the other 372 superintendents go? This legitimate question needs an answer. Is one available? We believe at least a partial answer is available.

They Go In Too Great Numbers

We computerized information on every California district and superintendent by entering data from several consecutive issues of California Public School Directories. One thousand and two K-12 districts operated continuously during the years 1974 through 1989. Our database allows us to report that a minimum superintendent turnover of 46.7% occurred over the last three years (see Figure 1). The word minimum is significant because some districts experienced multiple superintendent changes between directory issues. In addition, some changes did not get reported in a timely manner. We also conducted questionnaire surveys of all superintendents new to their positions in 1988-89 and all women superintendents listed in the 1989 directory. We received a combined 71% response to our surveys. This combined response gives us answers to several pieces of the question: "Where Do All the Superintendents Go?"

Literature on this issue consistently reports that superintendents leave positions for one of four reasons: (1) to become superintendent of a larger district with more status and responsibility; (2) to become superintendent of a district which pays significantly more and thus enhances status; (3) to escape from a disharmonious board/superintendent relationship; and/or (4) to blissfully enter into retirement.

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Which of these reasons accounts for the majority of these annual vacancies? What does a search of the database reveal? Could it be that other reasons are the true reasons superintendent seats are vacated? What conclusions can we draw from this mass of numbers crunched by our computer?

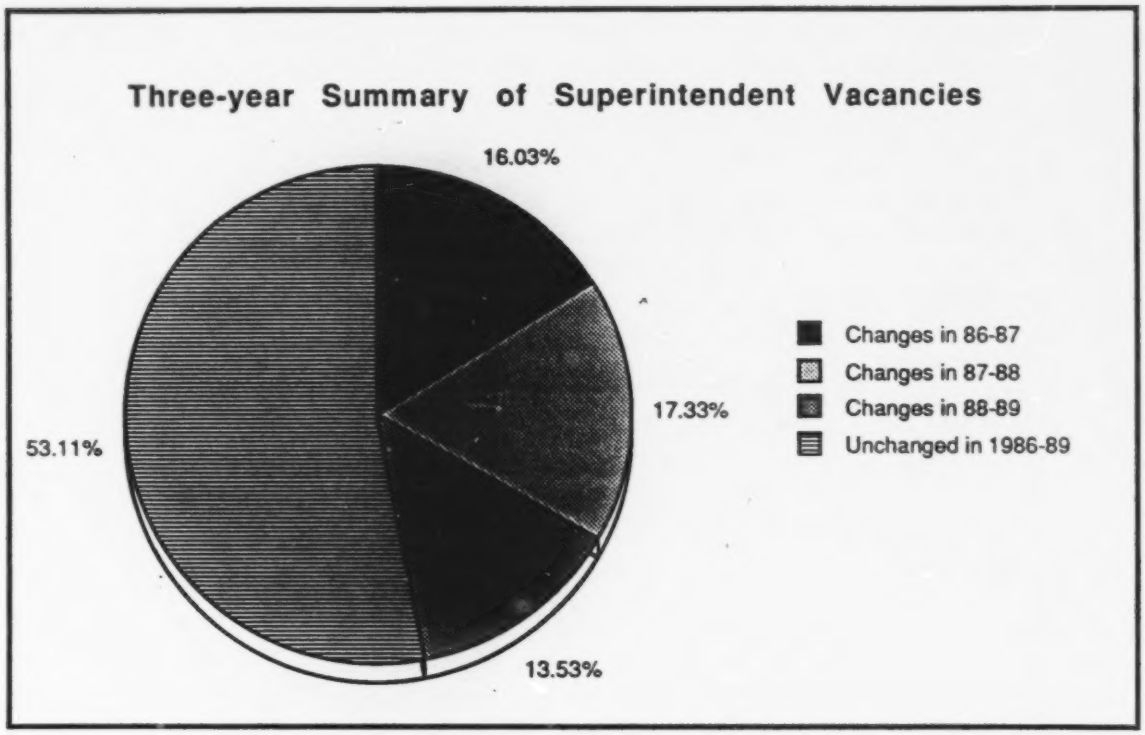

Figure 1: Rate of Superintendent Change 1986-89

They Go Into Other Superintendencies

Ninety-two individuals moved from one superintendency to another during the three-year period. We were able to track superintendents moving to larger-, same- or smalier-sized districts. Accepting conventional wisdom assumes these moves were made to larger districts to take on greater responsibility and to enjoy enhanced status. Forty-three, or 46.7%, of the persons changing superintendencies fit that category. However, if all 468 superintendents who left their seats are counted, only 9.2% of the

superintendent turnover resulted in a superintendent going to a larger district. Conversely, 18 individuals, or 19.4%, of the persons who changed superintendencies went to smaller districts. Thirty-one individuals—one third—moved to a superintendency within the same enrollment category. We used the usual enrollment categories of 0-249; 250-999; 1,000-2,499; 2,500-4,999; 5,000-9,999; 10,000-24,999; and 25,000 and up. Crunched numbers in our database do not support the conventional wisdom that a major reason for superintendent turnover is to move to larger districts with enhanced status and salary. Support for this perception is lacking whether we look at the total pool of vacated seats or whether we consider only the data for those persons moving from superintendency to superintendency.

Our database has no salary information. Therefore, we cannot make any factual statements as to the number of superintendents changing seats for greater salaries as reported in the literature. However, examination of salaries paid superintendents in San Diego County seems to correlate size of district to actual salaries no better than the data support the contention that superintendents change positions to go to larger districts. Average salaries paid five San Diego County superintendents with enrollments between 5,000 and 9,999 is within $200 of the average salaries paid six superintendents with enrollments over 12,000. Two of the five superintendents with enrollments under 8,600 have salaries exceeding those of four of the six superintendents with enrollments over 12,000. (Data taken from a study reported July 26, 1989, by a superintendent with an enrollment of 15,500). Our guess is that statewide data would not support this perception either.

As to conventional wisdom's assertion that superintendents move to escape disharmonious board/superintendent relationships—we think data support conventional wisdom. First, a search of the California Public School Directory data reveals that 372 of the 468 superintendents who vacated positions do not have their names in that document within the next two years as superintendents in California. In other words, 80% of the persons who vacate superintendencies do not move to other California superintendencies within two years.

They Go Into Other Administrative Positons

Do they retire? California Public School Directory data do not lead to that conclusion. How do we know? First, the names of 29, or 6.2%, of these 468 individuals appear in the directories as school principals; second, the names of 21, or 4.5%, appear as associate, deputy, or assistant superintendents; and third, the names of 14, or 3%, are listed as director or other central office persons, including interim administrators. This means that 13.7% of the superintendents who vacate seats assume or accept other positions of lesser responsibility rather than retire. The California Public School Directory data for those persons changing superintendencies and for those accepting

lesser positions in the same or other districts, account for only 164 of 468 or 36.2% of the persons leaving superintendency seats over the last three years. Does that mean that 308 individual superintendents retired over the last three years?

They Go Into Retirement

What facts or clues do we have to support this contention of the literature? Our questionnaire responses provide some interesting data. We surveyed 246 new superintendents and/or women superintendents about their predecessor's status. Specifically, we asked about predecessor retirement. Successor superintendents we surveyed reported that only 41 of their 164 predecessors actually retired. Thirty of those retirements were voluntary and 11 were involuntary. We believe that our 71% survey response allows us to conclude: only 18.38% of the superintendent seats vacated each year result in planned or voluntary retirements, while another 6.62% result in involuntary retirements. The percentage of persons vacating superintendency seats to retire voluntarily or involuntarily accounts for only 25% of the total. We have thus gathered reliable data to explain the current status of only 61.32%, or 287, of the 468 vacating superintendents (see Figure 2). Where did the other 181 individuals go? Where do all the superintendents go? Unfortunately, we do not have the answer. However, we do know—

They Go Because of Board/Superintendent Disharmony!

Examination of responses to our survey devastatingly reveals that 66.5% of the new superintendents reported disharmony between their predecessors and their boards at seat vacating time. We asked: "Which word best characterizes relations between a majority of the members of the board and your predecessor at the time the position became vacant? Amicable? Non-amicable?"

An amazing 109 of 164 respondents (66.5%) reported non-amicable relations existing at predecessor departure time. Further, 73 of these109 superintendents failed to have their contracts renewed, negotiated settlements of contract balances, found themselves terminated for cause—or simply resigned suddenly without announcing a move to any other position.

Interestingly, we followed a pilot group of superintendents appointed during the summer of 1986 for two years. We asked the board/superintendent relationship question to those new superintendents and to the board presidents serving at the time of their selection. Combined responses of superintendents and board presidents kicked that superintendent/board disharmony ratio to three out of four (75%) at the

time superintendents vacate their seats. Settlement agreements often commit board members and departing superintendents not to discuss settlement terms or say unkind things about one another. On that basis, we unequivocally state that board/superintendent disharmony is the major cause of superintendent seat vacancies by a very wide margin. Follow-up affirms that disharmony often exists between superintendents/boards even when the superintendent vacates one position to go to a larger district with greater status and responsibility. It is important to note that we made no effort to determine right or wrong positions of the disharmonious partners.

All this means that there is a tremendous heap of discarded, or at the least, unemployed superintendent experience and training awaiting ressurection from hell. This issue will be further examined in one of our future reports.

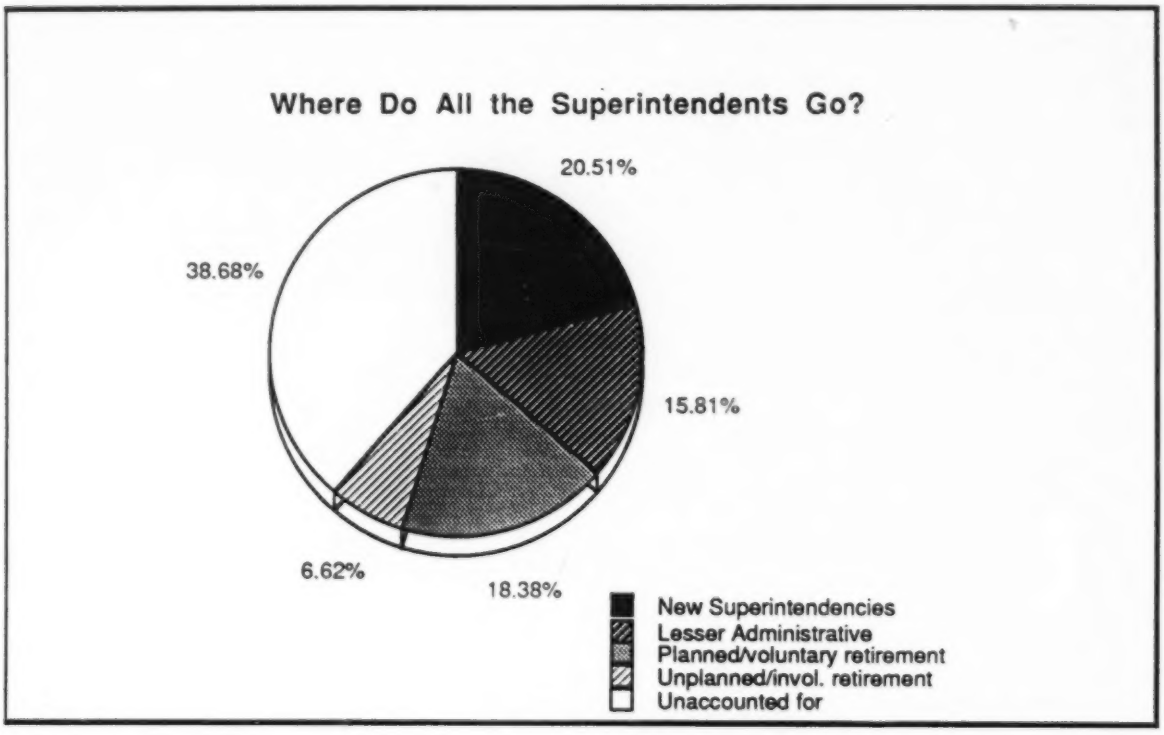

Figure 2: Positions held or status of vacating superintendents

Summary and Questions

We are thus able to make informed statements as to where about two-thirds of the superintendents who vacate their positions go. This information is shown in Figure 2.

However, that still leaves a significant number of those 468 vacating superintendents in limbo. We know that individuals may have become superintendents in other states, university professors, educational consultants, entrepeneurs or school board members. Even so, there remains a significant percentage who must be "writing their memoirs."

Four hundred sixty-eight superintendents leaving their positions in a three-year period is an enormous and unacceptable turnover. This equates to 46.89% turnover—almost 16% per year. Individuals who prepare themselves and secure administrative credentials make substantial personal investments to enter this "at profound personal peril" profession. Extension of the three year figures means that 60% of the persons who become superintendents leave the position altogether every six years. The good news is that there are about 1,000 opportunity openings for one to secure a superintendency every six years. The bad news is that the chances are six in ten that one will not be active in the field six years later. Who should be so foolish as to aspire to such a perilous profession?

Can California tolerate this devastating squandering of its highly trained human resources? There must be knowledge and skills somewhere in this great state to identify strategies for boards and superintendents to work in harmony. Or is it time to consider an alternative? Fifty-three of the fifty-eight county superintendents are elected. County superintendents enjoy the lowest turnover rates in the state. (Average of 9.2% per year over the last six years versus 16.1% per year for K-12 superintendents.) District superintendent elections would avoid 414 superintendency changes every six years if we project to K-12 superintendents the same turnover rate as that for county superintendents. Is it time for superintendents of K-12 districts to be elected public officials?